

Fritz Leiber

**Sonnets to Jonquil and All**

ROYA SQUIRES

1978



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## THE SCARLET FROCK

Most wearily I break the bread  
And strew the floor with rushes  
And lay the good wine that is red  
Beside the loaf and fishes.

Less wearily I scrub the stone  
And go to mend the broken crock  
And pray the time when I'm alone  
For putting on my scarlet frock.

Not wearily I dance away  
From breaking bread and mending crock  
To wash my feet with ending day  
And to put on my scarlet frock.

Beneath the moon I dance and mock  
With wild unceasing glee  
For I have on my scarlet frock  
And then a devil dwells in me.

JONQUIL STEPHENS



## BEHEMOTH OVER THE HILL

With a doxy like thee on me knees, Peggee  
With a doxy like thee on me knees  
And his Lordship's plumpest bird i' the pot  
And a Sedgemoor peat fire to baste 'un hot  
There be luck in the barrel's lees, Peggee  
There be luck in the barrel's lees  
Hips and haws up and down dale  
And the Devil may fill the auld 'ooman's pail!  
  
There be Gammer Death at the sill, Peggee,  
There be Gammer Death at the sill  
And the Lord, his wone self, be a-hanging for me  
And Leviathan be coming up out of the sea  
And Behemoth over the hill, Peggee  
And Behemoth over the hill.

J. S.



### SO DIES A DREAM

As a great wave crashing on a sea-girt shore  
Annihilates; and leaves but driftwood ever more  
Dead, dank and lifeless — never to soar  
So dies a dream.

As a wild flame scorching the green wood's heart  
Burns all night and leaves there not a part  
Of what was once alive with bird and deer and hart  
So dies a dream.

As dry rot creeping upward kills and clings  
To poison with decay and slimy crawling things  
That eat the heart and still the soul that sings  
So dies a dream.

J. S.



## THE MIDNIGHT WALL

Poor five-foot girl, she's six feet underground.  
At any rate, she'll never hear the sound  
Of traffic and rude voices she despised,  
Or shrill male English ego she realized  
Was such a bitching blight on women there —  
I always loved her gray, dry, silken hair.  
She was a beaut, and tough, and ever living,  
But not to any foe a bit forgiving.

Yet what is hate but love flipped on her face?  
A posture for compassion, not disgrace.  
And, incidentally, she was four-foot-ten —  
A height appeals to most girl-centered men.  
Black-haired Lolita, standing five feet tall,  
Why do you glare out of the midnight wall?



5447 RIDGEWOOD COURT

Well, well, it's over — five-four-four-seven and the clover.

Oh, how we loved those days on Ridgewood Court —

The parties and the music and the art.

The young men shouting and the girls a-fever

And me a naive sexual image-rover

And Jonquil never quite a sex believer.

And all such fucking fun, though seldom fucking —

White horses caprioling, nightmares bucking.

Upright piano crashing out folksong.

Mad, swashing saber fights — once, not for long,

Our taped blades hit the kitchen light and arced it:

The white glare struck the face and forehead quiff

Of sisters named Naom and Nancy Smith;

And someone rushed to change his car where he'd

cross-parked it.



## THE OTHER SIDE

And so it's over: Johnny and her tricks  
Vanished the other side the River Styx.  
Her karma served and all her sins forgiven  
Against herself, or 'gainst our Christian heaven.  
But yet her pride remains — I think of that —  
Her ebon stretch-pants and white leather hat,  
Her gothic dreamings and her love so warm,  
Her hate for every pig in uniform,  
  
Her sturdy pelvis and her stubborn pride,  
Her racialism, not to be denied,  
Her love, her love, her love: that above all —  
So vast within a girl not very tall;  
Her love which over three and thirty years  
Sustained me in this vale of acid tears.



## PAST DRUID GUARDS

Past slender Druid guards we inward move,  
Past woody lives that sway above the ground.  
Soft the leaves' kisses, softer the caress  
Of grasses from the tender earth new-slipped.  
Cool is the diamond dew on carmine-lipped,  
Green-sepaled and green-hooded blooms that bless  
Our haven, dear, of sighs and murmurous sound,  
By one more prayer its sanctity to prove.

And yet this grove that wraps our dreaming heart  
Is but a bower in a terrible wild  
Where shadowy, brooding figures stalk apart  
Along a panorama storm cloud piled.  
Now past our bower's quivering scrim we see  
The galloping mirthless hordes of destiny.



## THE VOICE OF MAN

When man first strode out of his ochered cave  
A host of gods came with him from the dark :  
Puissant guards with powers beyond the grave.  
But light is cruel to gods ; the awful spark  
Of knowledge grew, and man must watch each die,  
Until but one was left upon his throne,  
And that one shrunken to a puerile lie,  
And man must face the aching void alone.

In nature are strange, haunting cries that seem  
To voice the very heart of solitude :  
The mourning of the dove, the seahawk's scream,  
Hoot of the owl through woods that drearily brood  
Howl of the wolf under the sky's gray span ;  
Last of these lonely cries : the voice of man.



### POOR LITTLE APE

Poor little ape, you're sick again tonight.  
Has the shrill, fretful chatter fevered you?  
Was it a dream lion gave you such a fright?  
And did the serpent Fear glide from the slough?  
You cough, you moan, I hear your small teeth grate.  
What are those words you mutter as you toss?  
War, torture, guilt, revenge, crime, murder, hate?  
I'll stroke your brow, poor little ape — you're cross.

Far wiser beasts under far older stars  
Have had your sickness, seen their hopes denied,  
Sought God, fought Fate, pounded against the bars,  
And like you, little ape, they some day died.  
The bough swings in the wind, the night is deep.  
Look at the stars, poor little ape, and sleep.



### THE GRAY MOUSER: I

The city lifts black roof-shields toward the stars  
And shuts the jungle out with morticed stones  
And seals the scent of flowers in glass jars  
And locks Earth's secrets up in brass-clasped tomes.  
No satyr may live there, no faun survive  
The stench and clangor of each crowded street.  
The white-fanged beasts of night cannot contrive  
To gnaw an entrance through its black concrete.

Yet 'mongst the gargoyles on the slated roofs  
One gray-masked face peers down with living grin  
That mocks the scurry of the city's floor.  
Two gray-gloved hands tease ope' the library's door  
And break the ponderous books and scribble in  
Footnotes that give the lie to all proud proofs.



## THE GRAY MOUSER: II

Soft-sandaled feet press lightly on the stones  
That cobble Lankhmar's mazy alleyways;  
A grayish cloak melts in the river mist  
That billowing with many a darting twist  
Fumes round the corner from the nighted bays  
To chill with sorcery men's blood and bones;  
Only a bat whose sharp ears caught one sound  
Knows that the Mouser is on business bound.

A jewel from Quarmall or a girl from Kled,  
A caravel said to be docking soon,  
A rune that Sheelba magicked from the dead,  
Or a dread whisper from beyond the moon—  
What man can name the thing the Mouser seeks  
Or read the smile that links his sallow cheeks?



### SANTA MONICA BEACH AT SUNSET

White gulls show black 'gainst sunset sky,  
So distant that I hear no cry—  
A quivering troop in silhouette,  
Black flakes from smouldering cigarette  
Driven by fitful indoor wind,  
Their spots are brownianly assigned;  
Phone wires are bars—the birds are notes  
In symphony of scattering motes.

How spectral silent the wide beach!  
Waves' roar, gulls' screams can no more reach  
Than blast of bombs across the sea  
Can come eight thousand miles to me,  
Or screams of charring humans reach—  
Yet why so spectral is the beach?



1959: THE BEACH AT SANTA MONICA

At any one time  
A man may see too much,  
Feel too much,  
Know too much.  
Too much knowledge swirls the mind,  
Too much feeling twists,  
Too much striving paralyzes.  
Listen to the birds,  
Listen to the wind,  
Listen to the sea.  
See the ocean's white spiders  
Die in the spummy fringe.  
Observe the wheeling gulls,  
Black flakes of coming night.  
Watch for the green flash  
Of the vanishing sun.  
See the golden stalks of the jets  
Grow in the afterglow.  
Walk in the sound of the surf.  
Study the constant moon  
As she walks west and east  
And south and north,  
Marking her bounds.  
Strengthen yourself in sensation,



1959: THE BEACH AT SANTA MONICA

Brace yourself against your atoms.

The world is firm.

The universe is sure.

Return again to this knowledge.

#### THE AWAKENING

Loving you I have grown old

Quiet and bitter in all my ways

Loving you I have but sold

My happiness for empty days.

O love and hate are near akin

As birth to death, virtue to sin

Loving you has taught me — late

That love can bring one close to Hate.

JONQUIL STEPHENS



## TO A DEAD LOVER

Your limbs lie quietly beneath the grey dust and mould  
And I am done with you and all you were of old  
The blind worms creep about that once lovely head  
I held against my heart . . . once, when your blood ran red.

Long years ago I loved you, but now I smile  
Having other men a long, long while  
I have forgotten you, I say, and all you were . . .

. . . . But why do I hear your slow step on the stair . . .  
And wait, eyes closed, to feel your arms about me?

J. S.



## PENDAREN'S SONG

Woman's grief for a woman's breast  
The winds howl fierce over Dunkery Beacon  
The heart beats faint in its sad unrest  
And the knees weaken.

Woman's hair for a woman's tying  
The waves break wild upon Lulnorth Cove  
Cover your face and quit your crying  
And quell your love.

Woman's womb by Lodmoor water  
The frost bites bitter on White Nose Head  
Best for the child whether son or daughter  
It lay dead.

Woman's tears for a woman's drying  
The long night lingers on Salisbury Plain  
Love cannot reach you where you'll be lying  
Nor any pain.

Woman's bones for a woman's tending  
The wet dawn gathers on Winal Hill  
No more saving and no more spending  
She lies still.

Woman's dust for a woman's wonder  
The cold stars shine on Mendip snows  
A grassy mound and who lies under  
No man knows.

J. S.



## NOTES

Jonquil Ellen Stephens was born in England July 1, 1908, daughter of James (1850-1929) and Naomi (Prosser) Stephens (d. 1945) and sister of Lavinia, Violet, Adrian, and William (d. circa 1915) Stephens. Her paternal grandfather was Adrian Stephens (1794-1876) who invented the steam whistle in 1835, when he was chief engineer at the Dowlais Iron Works, and who was the son of Richard Stephens of Cornwall and descended from Ricardo Stephanio of Italy. Her paternal grandmother was Emily Stephens (d. 1866) a poetess of note and regular contributor to the *Hereford Times*, *Merthyr Telegraph*, and *Merthyr Express*.

She lived in London, near Merthyr Tydfil in Wales (where she went to school at Cyfartha Castle) and on the south coast of England. She attended Oxford University and the University of Chicago, where she was a president of the poetry club and lived with her aunt Ellen Grace Stephens (d. 1938) in the home of her first cousin Dorothy (Howell) Krah1, daughter of her aunt Elizabeth. On Jan. 18, 1936, she married Fritz Leiber (Jr.) and on July 10, 1938, gave birth to their son Justin.

She wrote at least two dramas, *The Heart's Desire* (a medieval romance involving witchcraft in Wales) and *Mrs. Lancing* (produced at the Cliff Dwellers club, Chicago, March 30, 1949, with Geraldine Page in the title role, directed by Joseph Belucci and featuring Yvonne O'Reilly and Fritz Leiber [Jr.]); two detective novels, *Death Has Bony Fingers* (set in a girls' school) and *Delilah Is Dead!* (title of first chapter); numerous poems and short stories ("Jealousy," "The Paternity of Tom Jenkins," "Nellie Norbree," "One Against Hollywood," etc.); and several other novels, including *Gimp and Go!* (tale of an American in ghostly and idiosyncratic Wales), *Lord of Darkness* (a brooding and off-trail modern gothic), *Nymph in the Brake* (a fantasy of rejuvenation by radioactives) and one about Charles II, Barbara Villiers, and Nell Gwyn. At the time of her death (Sept. 2, 1969) in Venice, California, she was at work on a biography of Abbott Kinney, the remarkable visionary and man of affairs who built that resort city, and they are both buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, Santa Monica, California, where her gravestone gives the year of her birth in error (mine) as 1907 instead of 1908.

iii This poem is copied from the typed and pasted-in text in Looseleaf Notebook (and Scrapbook) No. 1, where "broken" was spelled "brocken" and whence (the notebook and its enclosures including her last U.S. passport) most of the information in the biographical sketch above was taken. It appears to have been begun a year or two before our marriage. It contains poems by herself and others, newspaper clippings, and reproductions of paintings by an "EFB" of tranquil, 17th century British scenes. Looseleaf Notebook No. 2, much later, includes



some of her notes on Abbott Kinney. I have manuscripts of all the works mentioned in the sketch except "Nellie Norbree" and the Charles II novel, which may be lost. Jonquil told me that before our marriage she had burned manuscripts of novels she had written, including one of which I saw only the first two pages (about a girl sleeping on the moors of Wales and waking at dawn to observe a young priest troubledly praying on a hilltop while great cloud shadows pass) but now have no copy of those.

iv This poem (together with all the following ones by Jonquil) also is copied from Looseleaf Notebook No. 1, where they were all handwritten.

1 These three sonnets to Jonquil were written during the first three or four months after her death, with some, but not much subsequent revision.

2 For twelve years Jonquil and I lived at 5447 Ridgewood Court in Chicago, the only house we ever owned. The sabers were of the light, regulation fencing sort, their tips wrapped with surgical tape.

4 This sonnet was composed while I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, with minimal revision later. There were two more, but making something of lines like "I drink the empty cup of Christ the Lord" and "When, trembling, we face the harlot, Day" has proved too much for me. (It is of interest that Justin also attended the University of Chicago where he got his Ph.D., and also Oxford, getting his B.Phil.)

5 This and the following sonnet were composed while I was working as a precision inspector at Douglas Aircraft in Santa Monica during World War II. Each took a full swing shift. In 1949 they were published in my duplicated magazine *New Purposes*, which Jonquil helped edit and cut many stencils for.

6 I used this poem in my novel *The Wanderer*.

7 These two poems about my and Harry Fischer's character the Gray Mouser have been published in *Amra* and *The Conan Grimoire*. Once Harry himself scaled a library wall, but only to make an offering to the Great God Pan.

9 This sonnet in tetrameter echoes another war, Vietnam.

vi It should be noted that none of these poems by Jonquil ever appeared elsewhere than here to my knowledge, though a number of her other poems were published in *The Phoenix* (U. of Chicago students magazine), *The Chicago Tribune*, etc.

ix An earlier version appears scatteredly in *The Heart's Desire*, where it is part of the plot ("Witch's dust for a maiden's wonder," etc.) and whence the title was taken and the spelling of *Dunkery* verified. It is a happy circumstance that the final version of what is surely the best poem in this book should express the feminism which informed Jonquil's entire life.



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